Our Havana Triple Spy Helped & Hurt Castro

By PAUL MESKIL

Second of a series

"I was a spy," Frank Sturgis admits.

"I was involved in assassination plots and conspiracies to overthrow several foreign governments, including Cuba, Panama, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

"I smuggled arms and men into Cuba — for Castro and against Castro. I broke into the intelligence files of the Cuban Army and Air Force. I stole and photographed hundreds of secret documents.

"That's what spies do.

"I also broke into foreign consulates and business offices in Cuba, for the purpose of obtaining information, and into a import-export office in Caracas, Venezuela, that was a front for the KGB (Soviet Secret Service)."

Sturgis was a hired operative of the Central Intelligence Agency for at least a decade. Maybe he still is, though his cover was blown forever by the notoriety he received as a Watergate burglar. He constructed and controlled an espionage network in Cuba that is still functioning despite frantic efforts by Castro security forces and the KGB to destroy it.

Though he was only a bit player in the Watergate drama, Sturgis is a real-life James Bond whose exploits rival those of any fictional spy. Interviewed at the office of his Miami lawyer, Ellis Rubin, and at other places in New York and Florida, he candidly revealed many details of his colorful career as a war hero, secrets-stealer, gun-runner, guerrilla fighter and professional plotter.

Changed the subject

Asked if he had also been an assassin, he politely changed the subject. Some things he will not talk about.

A stocky, iron-jawed man who looks much younger than his 50 years, he was born Frank Angelo Fiorini in Norfolk, Va. He joined the U.S. Marine Corps at the start of World War II and fought through the Pacific with the famed First Raider Battalion. After the war, he served in the Air Force, Army and Navy Reserve.

He had the perfect training for a secret agent. The Marine Corps taught him judo, knife-fighting and jungle warfare techniques. The Air Force taught him to fly a plane and the Navy Reserve trained him to handle small, fast ships.

The Army completed this education. During a hitch in Germany, he was assigned to a security unit that handled top-secret reports from Allied intelligence agents all over Europe. This was his introduction to the dark world of espionage and intrigue.

SECRETS OF THE CIA

In Berlin during the chilliest part of the cold war he met his first real spy. She was a beautiful actress who also was an agent of Haganah, the secret army formed to defend the new state of Israel.

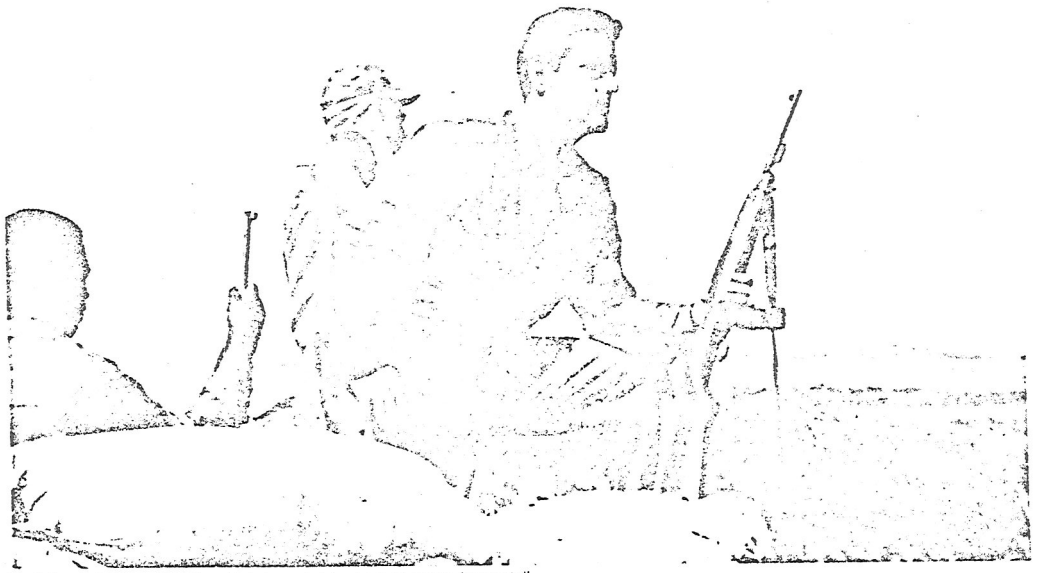
When he returned to civilian life, Frank became a Haganah courier — perhaps the only Roman Catholic in this group. In the '50s, he went to Miami to visit an uncle who had married a Cuban exile. Her family was close to Carlos Prio, the Cuban president who was ousted in 1952 by a military coup led by Fulgencio Batista. Frank met Prio and other wealthy Cubans whose Miami mansions were hotbeds of anti-Batista intrigue. Some of them supplied financial support for a fiery young rebel, Fidel Castro, who was then living in Mexico.

In 1957, Prio asked Frank to "go to Cuba, join Castro's army and let me know what he's doing." Frank accepted

(Continued on page 34)

Castro: "What I need is guns."

OUR TRIPLE-AGENT IN HAVANA



Frank Sturgis in Cuba: "I stole and photographed hundreds of secret documents."

A bit player in the Watergate drama, Sturgis was a real-life James Bond when he did his big jobs for the CIA

(Continued from page 3)

the assignment. He flew to Havana and with the help of a Cuban priest, he quickly located Castro's camp in the Sierra Maestra Mountains and volunteered his services.

"Fidel remembered me," he said. "We could understand each other. I spoke Italian, which is similar to Spanish, and he spoke some English. I offered to help train his troops, but he said, 'Frank, what I need is guns.'"

So Frank became a gun-runner. With money supplied by the Castro underground in Florida, he purchased thousand of rifles and other weapons from International Armament Corp. (Interarmco) of Alexandria, Va., the world's largest dealer in surplus arms. He then set up an elaborate land-sea-air smuggling network to get the guns and ammunition into Cuba.

He Became Triple Agent

After several months as a double agent, working for Prio and Castro, Frank became a triple agent. This time, he was recruited for the game of intelligence by a major league scout, Park F. Woolam, the State Department official then in charge of the U.S. Consulate in Santiago de Cuba.

"We met at the Case Grande Hotel in Santiago," Frank recalls. "Woolam knew who I was and what I was doing. He approached me or someone introduced us. We had several other meetings and he discussed my patriotism and so forth. I agreed to work with him.

"Later, when the revolution was over, I received orders to go to Havana. Woolam told me who to contact in the American Embassy there." His new contacts, Frank said, were CIA agents, one of whom was the embassy's military attache.

Castro immediately placed his most trusted officers in command of the Cuban military services. Major Pedro Diaz Lanz, a close friend of Frank's, became commander in chief of the Air Force and his brother, Marcos Diaz Lanz, became inspector general of that service.

Frank helped the Diaz Lanz brothers reorganize the Air Force and they made him their security and intelligence chief. He also became the officer in charge of inspecting and supervising all Cuban gambling casinos, which were owned and operated by American mobsters.

Frank said his CIA [illegible] presidential palace, in with Fidel. I recruited everyone I could, Americans and Cubans, to be undercover agents."

Max Garman Gonzales, a Miami businessman who took part in cloak-and-dagger operations against both Batista and Castro, has known and worked with Sturgis for many years. He says Sturgis "was a CIA employee from 1958 to 1968. The CIA asked him to participate in assassination plots in Cuba and elsewhere. Sturgis introduced top Cuban military and political leaders to American agents at the U.S. Embassy in Havana. During these visits, a conspiracy to assassinate Castro and other Cuban leaders developed.

"Two attempts against Castro's life were made in the early part of 1959. Both failed. The assassins then waited for a green light from Frank Fiorini Sturgis. A third attempt was made in 1960."

This reporter asked Sturgis when the agency first began thinking about assassinating Castro.

"The first discussion of assassination with my (CIA) contacts was in February 1959," he replied. "I was making reports on all the communist activity in the military. I suggested that this would be a good time to assassinate Fidel. I said I would organize it and follow it through.

"I would arrange an important conference at Campo Libertad (Camp Liberty, the combined army-air force base and headquarters formerly known as Camp Columbia). All the top commanders would come to the base in their jeeps and cars. I was going to station gunmen on the roofs, set up a crossfire. I would have wiped out Fidel, his brother Raul and all the top (pro-communist) military commanders in 30 seconds.

"I asked my contact in the Embassy to get a green light (official approval) on this. Whether this could have to come from the top level in Washington or a Security Council [illegible]

Sturgis and his CIA contacts devised two alternate plots. One was to execute Castro in the second-floor conference room at Air Force headquarters. As he and the other officers would not arrive at exactly the same time, it might be more practical to wait until they were all assembled around the conference table.

"The whole idea was to kill all of them at once. Unfortunately, if some of the anti-Communist officers were in there at the same time, they would have to go too. The lives of some of the anti-Communist commanders would have to be sacrificed in order to get Castro and his crew."

The third scheme involved planting a bomb in Castro's office. "I had access to the prime minister's office," Sturgis said. "I knew Fidel's private secretary, Juan Orta. I recruited him to work with the Embassy. I planned to go to Fidel's office with a briefcase full of explosives which I would leave there. When Fidel entered the office, a signal would be given and the bomb would be set off by an electronic device across the street."

The plotters waited several months for the green light from Washington, but it never came. "They couldn't make up their minds," Frank said of the unseen, unknown decision makers. "They couldn't decide what to do."

Asked for Green Light

But, according to former intelligence agents, the CIA later approved and bankrolled other plots to wipe out Castro. American adventurers, Cuban exiles, Mafia dons and high-ranking Cuban officials played prominent parts in these conspiracies.

In June, 1959 Castro fired 25 top Air Force officers suspected of disloyalty, including the Diaz Lanz brothers. Pedro Diaz Lanz then resigned from the Air Force and denounced Castro as a [illegible] Almeida, ordered Pedro's arrest and the Diaz Lanz brothers went underground.

At this point, Frank was pulled out of Cuba. "I left Havana on June 30 and came to Miami to arrange the escapes of the Diaz Lanz brothers and their families. Pedro and his wife got out by sailboat; Marcos was picked up by a plane."

The brothers fled to Florida, told all they knew about the Castro regime and went to work for the CIA.

A few weeks after Frank's abrupt departure from Havana, he received word that Castro was sending an assassination team after him. Frank's informant supplied full descriptions of the three assassins, who were Mexican communists. The FBI posted a round-the-clock guard on Frank's Miami home and federal agents followed him wherever he went.

Tailed to Florida

Customs and Immigration officers were alerted. The Mexican gunmen were spotted when they crossed the border and were tailed to Florida, where they were arrested. Their car was confiscated and they were booted back to Mexico.

On Oct. 25, 1959, an American B-25 bomber swooped over Havana and dropped thousands of anti-Castro leaflets. Castro called this "bombing" raid a Cuban Pearl Harbor.

"Pedro Diaz Lanz was the pilot," Sturgis told the News. "I was the co-pilot. Marcos Diaz Lanz and another Cuban were with us. Cuban Air Force fighters came after us but they missed us and almost shot their own planes down. The big guns at the Navy station and the Cabana fortress opened up but the angle of the guns was such that they were firing from the heights into the city. At least 36 people were killed and wounded."

The leaflet bombardment was the first of many CIA-sponsored missions Sturgis made to Cuba by air and sea. "I made at least 125 air operations into Cuba," he said, "with the green light and without the green light (with and without official approval). And I made some 60 boat missions.

"I had four boats. They were financed by the agency. One was a converted Coast Guard cutter, 83 feet long, with twin 650-horsepower engines. It has a maximum speed of 20 knots. Another boat, the Cusa, was about the same size. I also had two 36 foot fiberglass boats with radar and other sophisticated equipment. They could carry 30 people and do 70 miles an hour.

Next: The Panama Canal plot